

Outcomes focused

“some people in our sector concentrate more on the technical problem of measuring outcomes, and less on the strategic problem of achieving them. This is a disease, an affliction, and we can call it measurement anxiety. It can paralyse us and it seems to be contagious.” Richard Piper, National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

“Collaborate creatively: imagine and assemble dynamic experimental groups to address ‘big ideas’ and activate them in sessions in which outcomes can be radical and unexpected – we call this approach ‘extreme expertise and extreme collaboration’.” Creative & Cultural Skills/Counterpoint, 2009, After the Crunch: 70

The big idea

In an online article, Richard Piper describes being at an event and asking the participants to play a word association game. He asked 50 people to write down the first thing that came into their heads. When he said the word ‘outcomes’, 48 out of the 50 wrote down something to do with assessment or measurement. It confirmed to him what he suspected, that there is more focus on the technical problem of how to measure our activities than on the strategic problem of achieving them. The big idea is not that measurement is unimportant but that making a difference to people’s lives as a result of our activities is more important.

Purpose

The purpose of this tool is to consider this conundrum and look at how you develop a specific statement of the changes you want to see in the world rather than worrying about the methods you’ll use to measure them. Being clear about your outcomes should help achieve three things:

- Planning your achievements and improving them
- Monitoring and evaluating successes and failures
- Communicating your successes and failures

The tool

This tool consists of six big questions (Piper, 2010). Consider each in turn and answer them as specifically as you can:

1. Who/what in the world will change as a result of your work?
2. What changes do you want to make happen?
3. Why are those changes important?
4. What are the best ways to make those changes happen?
5. What other organisations are working with these people in this area and where do you fit in?
6. How can we make more change happen within our existing resources?

Now consider what evidence you need to collect to demonstrate how you have made those changes happen and who you need to tell about what has been achieved.

Take the next step

Consider your current business plan or strategy, if you have one. Does it clearly outline the changes you want to make happen? If you don't have an existing plan, how might you take an outcomes-based approach? Think of another organisation you know well. What would you say were the changes they were striving to achieve?

Top tips

- If you are clear on your intended outcomes, the data you need to collect will emerge
- Involve everyone with a direct interest in the discussions about the 'big questions'
- Don't let the data drive your communications. Be clear about your audience and what they want to know and why
- Watch out for the disease of measurement anxiety!

References

Piper, R. (2010). New Thinking on Outcomes-focused Strategy. Retrieved January 2011, from <http://www.knowhownonprofit.org/organisation/strategy/whatis/outcomes>

This tool has been developed with kind permission of Dr. Richard Piper and the NCVO